

The Deep Peace of Christmas

Psychologists suggest that each of us has the ability to highly influence a handful of people over our lifetime and to shape their lives.

Greg, was somebody who'd had a difficult start to life. It didn't take him long to get drawn into city gang culture and from there he became part of some of the most notorious football hooliganism of the 1980s.

Finding an identity in violence, Greg went from bad to worse as he became skilled at inflicting injury and pain. It couldn't go on, and eventually Greg was jailed indefinitely – safe behind bars, away from ordinary, decent members of the public.

If we're able to exert a heavy influence over a handful of people, then I'm one of those who has been profoundly influenced for the good through knowing Greg.

When I first met him, his life had been dramatically changed. In prison, he had learnt about Jesus and his message of forgiveness and offer of a new start. The transformation from thug to friend was remarkable.

Greg was somebody who I could talk to about anything. Each week, as the leader of a youth organisation in my home town, I would sit down with Greg and share my teenage angsts with him. Greg was always

there – and walked through those turbulent years with me, modelling patience and grace.

At Christmas, we sing songs and send cards that profess peace. But it's obvious to me from the news every day, that peace is elusive and is in short supply.

At Christmas, we hear readings about a baby, born long ago, but what can a baby do in a world rocked by suicide bombs, and impending threats?

Greg's life shows me, that the message of Jesus Christ, can achieve amazing things.

The baby Jesus grew up – and became a man who also influenced others. One of the things that Jesus said about himself was that – “God is upon me and he has given me the task of:

- Telling the poor good news
- Releasing those in a spiritual and mental prison from captivity
- Restoring sight to those who are emotionally blinded
- Giving the oppressed freedom
- Demonstrating God's favour and love.”

God is in the business of restoring lives which are broken and damaged, imprisoned or oppressed. This was the task that Jesus took on.

In a broken and damaged world, where satellites beam into our televisions 24 hours a day of bad news – we're in desperate need of some good news. A news story which offers hope and joy and peace.

For a society which cries out the virtues of freedom – free speech, free love, free tuition fees – we're incredibly imprisoned and held captive by some of this freedom. Imprisoned by:

- Debt
- Comparing ourselves to other people
- Chasing a dream for ourselves that just won't seem to come true.

There are so many things in our life and our local community to celebrate, but often we're not able to see or recognise them because our concept of what we need to be happy and fulfilled is wide of the mark.

We go through life, subconsciously in prison, in need of release. But where does this release come from?

God promises that he'll never leave us on our own. Wherever we travel, whatever we do, no matter what we face in the year ahead. God promises that he'll be there too.

This is the real peace of Christmas. The peace of knowing that we need never be alone. That we're accepted, understood and valued for

exactly who we are. Despite our insecurities and fears – God knows and cares for us.

This was what Greg found out, in his prison cell. Greg's whole character changed as he discovered the message of Christmas for himself.

Greg left prison, released from the captivity of violence, of inner loneliness, of shame. He left with new eyes that could see God's favour and grace towards him, despite what he'd done.

And he left as an agent of good news – a living, walking news story of hope, joy and peace that would bring restoration to others, like me.

- Who's the person that God has sent your way to make the Christmas story real for you?
- In what ways do you need to find the deep internal peace of the Christmas story for yourself? The peace that comes from knowing that you're not alone and that you're understood.

As we go into Christmas 2010, let's pray that we'll discover the true peace and message of Christmas for ourselves. That we discover the life changing message of Jesus Christ in its fullness.

Let's also pray that as we find it, we might be an agent of good news and restoration to other people around us – walking stories of good news and joy and peace.